

THE NORTHWEST, THE NATION AND THE WORLD

Pretty San Diego's delicious alter ego

After sun and sea, taste the growing slow food and craft beer scene

By ALEX PULASKI
THE OREGONIAN

Call me shallow, but San Diego County's pretty face has been drawing me back for years. The external attractions are so obvious.

Family activities abound, from the incredible zoo to its sister San Diego Zoo Safari Park to SeaWorld (see accompanying story). The Pacific Ocean, which is anything but that during our Northwest winters, is Southern California's winter playground, with kayaking, surfing and more. And — noteworthy as Oregon's rainy season drags on — you can count on near-perfect year-round weather, tending to the high 60s and low 70s.

But on a spring visit to San Diego and surrounding cities I came to know a different side of the region: its emerging slow food and craft beer scene. It's a kind of inner beauty that Portland has embraced for years, and that has blossomed over the past decade in San Diego.

If, as Mama will tell you, the surest path to a man's heart is through his stomach, that would explain why I came away with a deeper feeling for the area. With dozens of cutting-edge dining and brewing venues to choose from, it's a little hard to know where to begin ...

In Del Mar, where executive chef Paul McCabe's Kitchen 1540 is making contemporary American synonymous with fresh and local?

In Escondido, where Stone Brewing Co. has parlayed its phenomenal growth as a regional brewery into an onsite bistro for locavores? Or nearby San Marcos, where Port Brewing Co.'s cult army forms block-long lines for limited releases of its Lost Abbey Belgian-style beers at (gulp) as much as \$30 a bottle?

From my seat in the audience, the chorus of the San Diego area's dynamic food and beer scene sings most sweetly along the city's 30th Street Corridor, and its impassioned voice belongs to Jay Porter, a onetime software marketer with an unruly mop of gray hair.

High-quality slow food

"I know what good food tastes like," Porter says, "and the stuff you buy in the store doesn't taste right."

In 2005, Porter and others launched The Linkery, a gastropub that Porter describes as a "pre-industrial village" — an eatery that makes much of what

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Kitchen 1540

Cozy, modern and fresh in Del Mar; cheeses and pâté



Cafe Chloe

French bistro in Gaslamp Quarter; cheese plate



The Linkery

Pioneered slow food along 30th Street; the sausage picnic plate



SAN DIEGO CVB

The Pacific Ocean — here near Torrey Pines State Reserve in La Jolla — is a Southern California winter playground.

Days can overflow with options for family fun, activities

"Giraffes don't bite," explains our guide, Lee. Those three words provide consolation a few moments later, about the time a young giraffe leans over our shoulder, snakes out its tongue and pulls a mouthful of acacia leaves from our grasp.

This close encounter in the back of a flatbed truck at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park (formerly the San Diego Wild Animal Park) is one of dozens of family activities in and around San Diego, indoors and out.

From its world-renowned zoo to the sister Safari Park to ocean adventures

to museums, San Diego and neighbors such as La Jolla are packed with fun. Here's a slice, not meant to be exhaustive:

Zoos, theme parks

About 3.4 million people visit the San Diego Zoo annually, and if you've

ever been, you understand the draw. With 100 acres and more than 4,000 animals, this zoo is an exhaustive — and often exhausting — trip into the animal kingdom.

Rely on the buses for longer hauls

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San Diego: Gastropub emphasizes place, people

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its customers consume on site, from cask-aged beer to sauerkraut to bread to sausage and cured meats.

"The quality of meat that comes in our back door is the best in the U.S.," Porter says. "We get whole-carass animals and break them down with a band saw."

The menu details local food sources, right down to where the animal was raised or where the peppers or rice were grown. Bring an appetite and dig into From the Pit (\$35), a family-style selection of smoked pork, bacon and hot links, complemented by coleslaw, beans and beer bread.

Just as The Linkery maintains its connections to food sources, it cherishes its place in the neighborhood. Moving into new digs in 2008, Porter devised a system of roll-up garage-door walls on two sides that transforms The Linkery into an open-air restaurant on pleasant days. In effect, The Linkery flows onto the sidewalk and the remainder of 30th Street.

Many of the local eateries and pubs have embraced similar values.

"Jay was really the pioneer," says Ron Troyano, an owner of Alchemy, a nearby restaurant featuring seafood, seasonal menus and mouth-watering desserts made in-house, such as strawberry tarts and chocolate chile crème brûlée.

Along 30th Street you'll also find Toronado bar, where I counted no less than 90 beers on the board, from local favorites to Belgian imports to Oregon's own Deschutes Brewery Hop Henge IPA.

Also nearby, at The Ritual Tavern, co-owner Staci Wilkins says her philosophy has been to "keep it simple" by attracting customers to "a place where you know the people and you know where your food comes from."

What that translates to are things like vegan bread, onion rings that melt in your mouth, or a heavenly asparagus-mushroom soup. When Wilkins and co-owner Mike Flores couldn't find condiments that weren't heavy on preservatives and high-fructose corn sweetener, they started making their own.

The tap list is constantly being rotated, and every Thursday a new cask is tapped. I sampled Green Flash's 30th Street Pale Ale, a full-bodied pale that hon-

San Diego sampler

Where to stay: Paradise Point Resort & Spa (1-800-344-2626, paradisepoint.com) completed a \$20 million renovation earlier this year, and the modern, comfortable rooms complete the Polynesian feel of this island getaway. Bungalow rooms (no high-rise here) feature flat-screen TVs, marble vanities and iPod docks, and if you get a beachfront bungalow you can make s'mores on the sand and watch the sun go down. Five pools are sprinkled throughout the resort, including a faux beach at the main pool, plus there's a mile of beach along Mission Bay. This is also the closest resort to SeaWorld (less than a five-minute drive). There's a world of activities, from bike rentals to tennis courts to watercraft rentals at the marina. Rent a Jet Ski, as we did, and zip around Mission Bay. Rates are exceptionally reasonable for the fun and comfort you can expect here, starting at \$145 per night. **La Valencia Hotel** (1-800-451-0772, www.lavalencia.com) in La Jolla is a

stately, historic, world-class hotel built in 1926. From the pink exterior to tiled roofs to talavera tiles sprinkled throughout to the pool setting with its ocean view, you will run out of superlatives to describe this elegant property. Stay here if you can, and if you can't, come in for lunch or drinks on the Ocean View Terrace and soak in the ambience. Rates start at \$239 per night. **La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club** (1-800-640-7702, www.ljbtc.com) is slow-paced and comfortable, with a gorgeous beachside setting, heated pool and tennis courts. Walk from your room down the steps and directly onto the beach for a moonlight walk. The location is also perfect for surf lessons or kayaking (see related story). The Shores restaurant at a neighboring sister property, La Jolla Shores Hotel, is a great breakfast spot. Rates start at \$209 a night. The Modern **Hotel Indigo** (1-877-846-3446, tinyurl.com/2f3yolp) opened in July 2009 in the Gaslamp Quarter and is centrally located for

baseball games at Petco Park or shopping at Horton Plaza. Rates start at \$171 per night.

Where to eat: In San Diego, try **The Linkery**, 619-255-8778, www.thelinkery.com; **The Ritual Tavern**, 619-283-1720, www.ritualtavern.com; **Alchemy**, 619-255-0616, alchemysandiego.com; **Cafe Chloe**, downtown, 619-232-3242, www.cafechloe.com. Further out, visit **Kitchen 1540**, Del Mar, 858-793-6460, www.laubergerdelmar.com/kitchen1540. **A.R. Valentien**, La Jolla, 858-777-6635, www.arvalentien.com

Have a brew: Stone Brewing Co., Escondido, 760-294-7866, www.stonebrew.com; **The Lost Abbey/Port Brewing Co.**, San Marcos, 1-800-918-6816, ext. 107, www.lostabbey.com; **Toronado** bar, San Diego, 619-282-046, www.toronadosd.com

Brew tours: Brew Hop, 858-361-8457, www.findgreatbeer.com; 2½-hour tours start at \$75 per person.

More info: San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau, sandiego.org

ors the 30th Street food and craft brew scene.

"If you like beer," Wilkins said, "This is the place to be."

Brews to choose from

"No other place in the U.S. offers the diversity of (beer) styles, techniques and flavors that San Diego County does," proclaimed a 2009 article in Food & Wine magazine. Another article in Men's Journal magazine the same year named San Diego the top beer town in the U.S., with Portland (sigh) in third place.

While the rankings are debatable, there's no doubt that San Diego and the surrounding area have joined the ranks of the best craft-brew scenes in the country, along with Portland, Seattle and Denver.

I set out to sample two area giants, Stone and Port Brewing, in the back of a Lincoln Navigator driven by Summer Nixon, co-founder of Brew Hop, which conducts customized brewery tours. First stop was Stone, where co-founder Greg Koch has realized double-digit sales gains for years despite spending nothing — zero — on advertising. The nonprofit Brewers Association ranked Stone 15th nationally among craft brewers in sales volume for 2009.

"We're a philosophy-driven company," Koch says. "We don't focus on trying to meet a sales goal — we focus on what we do."

What Stone is doing, besides making a variety of acclaimed hoppy ales and Belgian-style

beers in its sleek brewery, is pushing the envelope of locally sourced comfort food in its gorgeous on-site bistro. The restaurant flows into a scenic garden that Koch and others labored to design and plant themselves.

San Marcos is a short drive away, but the vibe at Port Brewing is decidedly different — much more blue-collar. Set in an industrial warehouse, the brewery is a maze of stainless-steel tanks, French oak barrels and snaking hoses.

The brewery's line of Lost Abbey Belgian-style beers has attained cult status, thanks to a willingness to experiment with wild yeast strains and equally wild methods. Hot Rocks relies on super-heating chunks of granite in a turkey fryer and pouring the lager over them. Judgment Day ale required a brewer to wield what amounted to a mini-flamethrower to caramelize a batch of raisins.

The combination of industry, artistry and crazy genius, says Sage Osterfeld of Port Brewing, has put Lost Abbey and other innovators in the San Diego area in the same position that Chateau Montelena of Calistoga found itself in 1976 after winning a blind taste competition against French wineries. The great German beers are under assault.

"We take risks on all kinds of wild stuff," Osterfeld says.

Branch out nearby

Katie Grebow, chef at Cafe Chloe, a French bistro in San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter, walks

with me through the Little Italy farmers market, eyeing fresh greens, colorful peppers and local seafood.

She relies on as much as 90 percent of her produce to be delivered by local vendors, to complement the succulent coq au vin or dreamy macaroni, pancetta and bleu d'auvergne gratin (that's bistro-speak for mac and cheese).

Just as many of the best breweries "in San Diego" are actually in neighboring cities, some of its best new and evolving restaurants are as well.

At A.R. Valentien in La Jolla, executive chef Jeff Jackson has been a regional pioneer in the slow-food movement. In a glorious white-linen-and-dark-woods Craftsman-style setting, with views of the pines and the ocean, expect the organic chicken to be tender and moist, the wild striped bass to be slightly crispy on the outside and mild and juicy inside.

At the modern and cozy Kitchen 1540 in Del Mar, the charcuterie plate of cured meats and cheeses is superb, with American organic prosciutto and Spanish chorizo. Tempura vegetables are moist puffs, light as air, and the flavor-packed roasted young chicken and vegetable succotash leave dessert beyond consideration.

They have run out of the Stone IPA, but that's OK. I know where to find some tomorrow.

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Activities: Hop into the water for surf, kayak outings

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inside the zoo, and get an early start, before the zebras — and the kids — start hankering for a nap.

Regular park admission is \$40 for adults, \$30 for ages 3-11. A five-day pass including the zoo, Safari Park and SeaWorld costs \$121/\$99. sandiegozoo.org

It's hard to imagine a more informative and intimate wild-animal experience than feeding giraffes at the Safari Park. Guides explain some basic background (the animals eat 50 pounds or more of acacia leaves a day; their tongues are roughly an inch long for every foot of height) and they keep it entertaining.

"I've heard that makes good hair gel," Lee said, after one of the kids' hands got loaded with giraffe slobber.

Regular park admission is \$40 for adults, \$30 for ages 3-11. The 2½-hour photo caravan costs \$90 per person and requires reservations. Children must be 6 or older; sandiegozoo.org/park/specialtours

In addition to the dazzling killer whale, dolphin and other animal shows, SeaWorld offers a handful of rides — several with the opportunity, or threat, of getting soaked. There are also multiple add-ons that will get you up-close-and-personal with sea life, but with some pretty steep tariffs — \$190 for 20 minutes in the water with a dolphin, for example.

One low-cost alternative (a short wait in line is required) that gets you within touching distance of the dolphins is to feed them at specified times at the Rocky Point Preserve exhibit.

Regular park admission is \$69.99 for adults, \$59.99 for ages 3-9. Dolphin feeding costs \$6 for a tray of fish. seaworld.com

Ocean fun

As we prepare to take on the waves in La Jolla, instructor Gillian Gibree of Surf Diva tells us, "The most dangerous thing out there is your board."

I can't say my second surf lesson in the last couple of years was a failure, since Gibree did her best, but I'm beginning to think surfing is not my sport. My son David, 13 at the time, bested me, getting up a few times.

His final ride lasted about five seconds, then he jumped into the water and stood up, hands held high, triumphant.

Individual lessons start at \$82.50 per hour for one person, but prices dip as the group gets larger, to about \$60 an hour per person for groups of five. Wet suit and board included. surfdiva.com

Guide Tommy Rooney dispenses a wealth of information on marine biology during an introductory paddle with La Jolla Kayak. We see sea lions sunning themselves, cormorants on the cliffs, giant kelp, a rare brown pelican.

But the pounding surf keeps us from getting close to shore, where leopard sharks can often be seen by the dozen. It's a divine ride nonetheless.

Tours start at \$35 for a single kayak, \$60 for a double, including equipment. lajollakayak.com

Museums

The New Children's Museum opened the doors of its modern home in downtown San Diego's Marina District in May 2008. Expect plenty of hands-on activities, from painting to forming shapes with clay to stacking blocks to wafting bubbles on the terrace.

Admission is \$10 each for children and adults, but free on the second Sunday of each month. Closed Wednesdays. www.thinkplaycreate.org

If you dig Andy Warhol — a silk screen by him, "Flowers," is on display here — you'll like the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (we visited the La Jolla branch; there is another in downtown San Diego). If not, walk straight to the back to the small but pleasant sculpture garden; check out, among other displays, the riot of watercraft suspended in Nancy Rubins' "Pleasure Point."

Free admission for those 25 and younger; military, seniors and students, \$5; the rest of us, \$10. Closed Wednesdays. www.mcasandiego.org

— Alex Pulaski

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